

1721
REFLECTIONS
ON
THE REVOLUTION OF A CENTURY.

A
SERMON

PREACHED

At the CATHEDRAL CHURCH of WELLS,

On SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 1800.

By GEORGE BEAVER, B. D.

Rector of TRENT, in the County of SOMERSET,

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S E R M O N, &c.

PSALM XC. 12.

*So teach us to number our Days, that we may apply our
Hearts unto Wisdom.*

WE are now far advanced in our progress through a stage, which, whether we consider it as the commencement or termination of a CENTURY, equally demands our most serious attention to so interesting and awful an event.—There are, it is to be feared, too many, even amongst them that “name the name of Christ,” the years of whose lives have stolen away, one after another, imperceptibly; until, at length, they have seen the wide circuit of an AGE, all at once, closing around them; without their ever having bestowed one moment’s meditation on the part which they have acted, during the portion of time assigned by Providence to each of them respectively, in the course of its several gradations.

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Should there be any here present, whose Consciences call upon them to plead guilty to this heavy charge; let me conjure them, as they tender the salvation of their immortal souls, to begin now, even now, though it be so late, to bring their ways to remembrance. Let them arrest the passing moment, and not suffer the fleeting phantom to vanish from before them, until they have *forced a blessing from it; until they have made a covenant with themselves, to exert their utmost endeavours towards redeeming the inestimable treasure, so prodigally wasted by them; to atone, as far as in them lies, by their future conduct, for their deplorable neglect of the days, and months, and years, that are already gone over their heads.

In the mean while, it is an alarming consideration to all of us, that even they who may have appeared to themselves as the most wary, spiritual, Economists of their time, on adjusting their accounts of it, at its stated revolutions, may perhaps have found the balance not so much in their favour as they had flattered themselves with the presumption that it would have been.—Indeed, after all the circumspection we can use, all the attention we can pay to a regular distribution of the various portions that make up the number of our days, it is
more

* Gen. xxxii. 26.

more than probable that some of them will have escaped unnoticed, and, consequently, unimproved, by us.

What allowance will be made for these deficiencies, at the great day of reckoning, by an all-gracious and most merciful Judge, can be known to him alone. Let us, however, be particularly cautious not to delude ourselves with the vain conceit that they are of too insignificant a nature ever to be brought into the account against us. God admits of no useless, empty spaces in the great Area of human life. In our spiritual arithmetick, as well as in the computation of our temporal concerns, every article must have its weight. On estimating our expenditure of the time committed to our trust, every fraction (if I may be allowed to use the term), every point, or tittle, must claim its appropriate place, and contribute towards completing the grand accumulation of all the component parts. Not a minute of our lives will pass unobserved by his all-piercing eye, with whom † “one day” (I may add—a single moment) “is as a thousand years.”

Although reflections of this kind can never be unseasonable, surely, at the present striking juncture, they are entitled to our warmest reception, and cannot fail to stamp the most forcible impression on our minds.—The contemplating a term

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of

† 2 Pet. iii. 8.

of years, not only far exceeding the utmost usual extent of the age of man, but likewise forming a principal division in the important *Æra* which commenced at the rising of the *SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS*, must necessarily call back the attention of every considerate person to whatever may present itself to him, throughout the general survey, in a moral and religious view, as, in a more especial manner, demanding his notice.

We are impelled by such a retrospect to number, not only our own days, but the days of those who have gone before us; and we shall be sure of finding our account in it, if, by the Grace of God, we shall learn, from our observation of the time that is past, to be wisely provident of that which is to come.

Let us then pause awhile on, not only the share which we may have had in so extensive a period, but also that of our forefathers, as connected with ourselves, by their having been united in the same civil and religious body, of which we, in our turn, have become members, through a succession derived to us by Providence;—and may it be continued to our latest posterity!

“ One

† “ One generation shall praise the works of the Lord unto another, and declare his power.”—The peculiar, comprehensive, round of time, which (at least, as far as respects the several portions of it that have fallen to our own lot,) cannot fail, at the hour of serious meditation on our conduct, to present itself to the minds of every one of us, began its career with the full enjoyment of our national religion and liberty, —firmly fixed on their true basis ; from the tottering state of which, but a few years before, they had well nigh been overthrown.—These invaluable blessings, of which our ancestors became so happily possessed, have been guarded by them with all the care and vigilance due to such sacred deposits. They have been faithfully transmitted to us—be it our’s as faithfully to preserve them.

But our Fathers were not contented with having been themselves partakers of these gracious dispensations of God’s mercy and goodness.—They did not think it enough to confine their heavenly influence to the inhabitants of their own country. Their views were so extensive, their hearts so enlarged, as to invite, to a joint participation with themselves of the pure and uncorrupted Christian Faith, thousands of their fellow-creatures, in far distant parts of the globe ; many of them, ’till then, so totally destitute of a proper exertion of
their

their rational faculties, as to resemble the human species in little more than their form.

It pleased the Almighty to put into the heart of a glorious Prince, who, under his especial guidance, had secured our Church and State against the assaults of arbitrary power, and Popish superstition, to establish, by his Royal Charter, a Society, for the purpose of supporting Christianity, where already embraced, in our Colonies and Factories abroad; and dispersing the knowledge of it amongst the poor unenlightened Heathens, who formed no small portion of them—thereby both qualifying them for the attainment of everlasting happiness in the world to come—and rendering their temporal servitude less grievous, by instilling into their minds the religious, healing, principles of patience, content, resignation, and fidelity.

Thus auspicious was the Beginning of an Age, ever to be distinguished in our annals, to the diffusing of the light of the Gospel of Christ amongst those miserable wretches, who had hitherto lain in darkness and the shadow of death; whose minds had been no less enslaved than their bodies; tied and bound with the chains of the grossest ignorance and barbarism.—To rescue them from this deplorable condition, was the grand object, at its first setting out; and, through the whole

whole of its progress, they, who have successively been so laudably employed in this “work of the Lord,” have happily found it to “prosper in their hands.”

Oh! that, in its more advanced state, it had been crowned with the additional blessing, if not of a total release from their slavery, yet, of an effectual check to the almost unparalleled species of tyranny, under which, to the disgrace of our most holy religion, so many of our fellow-creatures, and fellow-subjects, still groan, even in a Christian country;—Wretches, torn from their home—their dearest friends—their native soil—forced on voyages, in which, from their hard treatment, and close confinement, numbers of them have inevitably perished; whilst their miserable survivors have, for the most part, been reserved for no milder fate, than their being exposed, like beasts, to public sale, and then compelled to linger on, in one continued round of insupportable toil; accompanied, in some horrid instances, with unremitted stripes from the scorpion-chastisement of their merciless, unfeeling, tormentors.—And this—in our own Colonies—under the sanction of men, who call themselves CHRISTIANS!—Gracious Heaven!—but—let us not presume to anticipate the counsels of the Most High.—Let us patiently await the fulfilling of our Blessed Lord’s evangelical promise, that || “there should be one fold, under

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“ one

“ one shepherd.”—Let us comfort ourselves with the reflection, that the happy period will arrive, when § “ the Lord
 “ God shall cause his righteousness and praise to spring forth
 “ before all nations :”—when we shall be * “ all one in Christ
 “ Jesus ;”—when there shall be no distinction of “ bond or
 “ free ;”—when even the poor, despised, outcast NEGRO shall
 be no longer the slave of an inhuman fellow-creature, but the
 servant of him, “ whose service is perfect freedom”—a Disciple
 of the BLESSED JESUS—† “ a Son—an Heir of God,” together
 with ourselves, “ through Christ,” ‡ “ according to
 “ the promise ;”—for we are || “ all the children of God, by
 “ faith in Christ Jesus.”

However remote the completion of this particular event, as
 included in the general prediction, may be—though it should
 please God, that neither ourselves, nor generations to come,
 should be blessed with the attainment of an object so devoutly
 to be implored, yet it behoves us to keep the glorious prospect
 still within our view ; not to despond, but to shew our
 trust in Providence, by furthering its gracious designs, to the
 utmost of our power ; not to give up the cause of Christianity,
 and common Humanity,—but to exert ourselves in its
 support, that the influence of our zeal may, through the assistance

§ Isa. lxi. 11.

* Gal. iii. 28.

† Gal. iv. 7.

‡ Gal. iii. 29.

|| Gal. iii. 26.

tance of the Divine Grace, be extended to future ages; and to contribute our endeavours, as instruments in the hands of the Almighty, towards facilitating the accomplishment of this heavenly purpose; submitting, with all humility, the precise time of its being brought to pass, to the peculiar designation of his divine wisdom.

With hearts thus devoted to the civil and religious interests of our miserable, degraded, fellow-creatures—to whom, as inhabitants of our own dominions, and, as such, having a just claim to the protection of the same Government with ourselves, we are so closely united;—let us steadfastly proceed, in an humble confidence, that, with the aid of God's Blessed Spirit, we shall, henceforward, abound more and more in this, and every other work of the Lord;—knowing, that whatsoever we shall undertake in his holy name, either in our collective, or private capacity, our “labour will not be in vain
“ in the Lord.”

Great indeed must our labour in the service of God be, ere we can become worthy of the recompence of reward.”—We shall, all of us, on a review of our lives,—even those who have made the best use of their time,—still find much to do;—many of us, I fear, much to be undone;—a whole train of unruly lusts and affections, which have rivetted themselves

themselves into our very constitution, to be torn from their strong holds;—" the old man, which is corrupt, to be put off," and a new nature, as it were, superinduced in his room.—All this is but preparatory to our working, with effect, in Christ's vineyard.—We need not be told, that the ground, which is over-run with weeds, and choaked with briers and thorns, must be thoroughly cleansed, and subdued, before it can be in a fit state for bringing forth fruit to perfection. We know, there are noxious plants, in plucking up which, if we leave the least fibre behind, it will grow, and spread itself to the size of the root from which it sprang.—In the diseases of the mind, as in those of the body, a mere temporary amendment is but of little avail. We must be on our guard against the danger of a relapse. Every symptom of a returning malady must be cautiously watched. Our antidote must be always at hand, to counteract the poison, ever lurking in our depraved nature.

And—when can such considerations as these be more interesting to us, than on our placing before our eyes the solemn spectacle of a Period, including the revolution of no less than a hundred years, sinking in the abyss of time; and viewing ourselves as launching into the current of an unexplored AGE, without knowing whither the tide will carry us; during our course in which, in order to the being secured from the violence

violence of raging storms and tempests, we must strain every nerve, both of body and mind, to the utmost.

But—the skilful, wary, mariner will not content himself with his endeavours to be prepared against the fury of the stormy wind, that lifteth up the waves of the great deep.—He will consider, that there are other, latent, perils,—the avoiding of which will equally demand an exertion of his unremitted care and circumspection.—In the Ocean of Life, no less than in that which is formed by nature, there are unseen shoals, and shelves, and quicksands, which if, for want of a due exploring of them, we inadvertently run upon, they will be our certain destruction.—In fact—the danger is greatest to those who think there is none. To such, their security too often proves their ruin.—The roaring of a Charybdis, and the barkings of a Scylla, were a sufficient warning to the § wandering Hero of old, for being on his guard against those avenues of death—but, had he not (according to the fabulous account of his voyage) been cautioned, and secured, against the fatal allurements of the calm, and therefore unsuspected, shore, on which the Sirens had taken their stand, both he, and his companions, would have fallen a sacrifice to their enchanting melody, and been sunk in the gulph, into which those fascinating seducers are represented as having plunged themselves,

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themselves,

themselves, in despair, on finding their snares at length eluded by the united force of wisdom and resolution.

What an almost Christian Moral have we here couched under a no less significant than beautiful allegory ; which, though a poetical fiction, experience has not failed to realize ! —In our passage through the world, whilst we are gliding, at our ease, on the smooth surface, we little think of the rubs that anon await us. Little are we aware of the traps in the way, which our seemingly most cordial friends—those Bosom-Sirens—*“ the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and “ the pride of life,” are continually laying for us.—But—let it be remembered, that Virtue, unless kept constantly in action, by a vigorous opposition to every form of Vice, will become so debilitated, as to sink under its slightest attacks ;—on the contrary—when armed at all points, and on the watch, so as to render it impossible to take her by surprise, she needs not fear the most violent assaults of her open and professed, or the most subtle and insinuating artifices of her secret enemies.

According as each of these opposite principles shall prevail, will our happiness or misery, whether we consider ourselves as individuals, or as forming one compacted, national body, be determined.

* 1 John, ii. 26.

determined.—Surely, we cannot be at a loss, on which of them to fix the preference.—In our united, public, character, what ought we more heartily to deprecate, than the being seized with a general Torpor, destructive of all civil and religious energy? What ought we more earnestly to sue for, at the throne of Grace, than a continuance of the divine blessing on the prudent and virtuous exertions of those, by whom, under the protection of Providence, our lives, our property, our most holy religion, have been preserved, amidst the almost universal depredations of avowed foreign enemies, and the vile traiterous machinations of still more dangerous domestic foes? Let us not cease to praise the Lord, for having graciously enabled the vigilant Guides, who have been placed at the helm, to steer our vessel hitherto, not only with safety, but in a full tide of glory.

In the mean while, we cannot but be thoroughly sensible, that it is incumbent on us, as distinct members of the Community, to contribute, in our several stations, towards alleviating the burden of those, on whose shoulders the government of it rests, by a ready concurrence in furthering the measures necessary to the securing of its safety. As much as this is required of us, in our respective, separate, capacities, at all times; but, in cases of emergency, we are no less prompted by our interest, than impelled by our duty, to join hearts and
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hands in endeavouring to extricate the State to which we belong from the difficulties and distresses that attend it.—Need I remind you of the happy effects of such combined exertion?—Had it not been for the union which displayed itself at the awful moment of impending danger to these realms, what would have become of our laws—our liberty—and our persons?—To what, under Heaven, does this KINGDOM, as such, owe its present EXISTENCE, but to the wisdom of those who contrived—the firm legislative authority which sanctioned—and the general, national, zeal, prepared to put in execution the means of warding off the blow with which we were threatened, by projected invasions, both of our own territories, and those of a Sister-Nation, from a most insidious and powerful enemy,—rendered, at the time, the more formidable, by the too-well grounded apprehensions of there being bands of vile miscreants, dispersed throughout the land, eager to join in the destruction of their native Country.

From the dangers with which we have been thus surrounded, has it pleased our Heavenly Father, in his infinite loving kindness, to deliver us. We are still, through his blessing,—as strenuous assertors of our rights and liberties at home, and no less valiant defenders of our national property abroad,—a great and flourishing People.—But—let not our present security from the danger of intestine commotions, or the train
of

of prosperity, which has so uniformly attended us in our commercial and military character, lift us up to a haughty and unnatural independence. We cannot but know, where our great and ultimate trust is to be fixed. †“ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy, hath the Lord saved us.”—And who can say, how soon this mercy, unless we make a proper use of it, may be withdrawn from us? Be it our wisdom, to beware—(and, from the alarming face of things, the advice appears to be more than ordinarily important,)—lest we forfeit it;—by seriously reflecting on the days we have seen of late, and on what is now passing before our eyes—the warnings we have had, and those which are still hanging over our heads, to repent us of our evil doings, and to turn to the Lord our God—not with mere formal, temporary professions of sorrow and humiliation; but by a constant and uniform renunciation of sin, and a steady perseverance in the ways of godliness.

Who can tell how soon the same almighty arm which hath so highly exalted us, as a Body Politic, in the sight of all nations, may depress us, in our moral capacity, as Individuals, that have abandoned all further claim to the divine protection?—If the tender mercies of the Lord will not melt our obdurate hearts, surely they cannot be so callous as not to be sti-

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mulated

† Titus, iii. 5.

mulated by the no less gracious, though severe, strokes of his correction, to a lively sense of our depravity.—If, amidst our late exultations at the series of successes with which our Navy has been crowned, we have been unmindful of, or not sufficiently humbled at reflecting on the calamities that have been the unavoidable portion of so many of our brave Countrymen, in their perils, both by sea and land;—if we have been unmoved at the ravages of war in distant regions, because the rod has not been laid directly on our own backs;—let us at least be awakened by a fresh source of terror and dismay, which has, in a literal sense, come home to ourselves, and is even now at our doors—a chastisement from Heaven, the smart of which, at this moment, pervades every corner of our afflicted land.—Let us cast up our eyes to the Firmament, and tremble at the recollection of the late incessant floods, gushing out from the clouds above—overwhelming the fruits of the earth, and threatening us with (as the fore consequence, which only God’s goodness can avert) the horrors of Dearth and Famine.

What may we conceive the feelings of David to have been, when, on his confessing that he had † sinned greatly in numbering the people of Israel, and beseeching the Lord to “do away his iniquity,” he received, through the mouth of Gad, his Seer, the following message—“Go and tell David, saying,
“ Thus

† 2 Sam. xxiv. and 1 Chron. xxi.

“ Thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things ; choose thee
 “ one of them, that I may do it unto thee. Choose either
 “ three years famine, or three months to be destroyed before
 “ thy foes, (while the sword of thine enemy overtaketh thee,)
 “ or else three days the sword of the Lord, even the Pesti-
 “ lence in the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying
 “ throughout all the coasts of Israel.”—What a dreadful, but
 gracious, alternative!—The King, though in a great strait, is
 still at liberty, of three sore evils, to limit the vengeance of
 the Almighty to the infliction of only one of them.—As the
 Angel, which was sent by God, was putting the terrible sen-
 tence, that had been made choice of, in execution, “ it re-
 “ pented the Lord of the evil ; and he said to the angel that
 “ was destroying Jerusalem, It is enough, stay thine hand.
 “ And the Lord commanded the angel, and he put up his
 “ sword again into the sheath thereof.”—Here was Mercy, in
 the midst of Judgement.—“ The King and the Elders of Is-
 “ rael, who were clothed in sackcloth, had fallen on their
 “ faces ; and, as for those poor sheep, the people, what had
 “ they done ?”—But can a Nation, “ laden with iniquity—a
 “ Seed of evil-doors,” have any claim to such qualified over-
 tures of forbearance from an Almighty Avenger, whose wrath
 and indignation they have so strongly and incessantly pro-
 voked ?

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Not to palliate the matter, (especially within these sacred walls)—can the inhabitants of this land insure to themselves a single moment's respite from the united assaults of the sword, the famine, and the pestilence? Can they fondly imagine, that the Lord will put it to their choice, which of them to submit to?—Have we not, for a long time, continued to groan under one of these severe chastisements? Does not another stare us in the face, with threats of withholding from us the staff of life?—And to fill up the measure of our terrors—may not the Minister of God's Vengeance be, at this very instant, awaiting the divine mandate for diffusing, by the blasting of the breath of his displeasure, the pestilential fumes of an infected, commercial coast, through our, as yet, uncontaminated and salutary isles?

Have we so soon forgotten the danger at which, but a very few years ago, we were justly alarmed, of being visited with the like grievous calamity with that which we now most piercingly feel within our borders?—Has our providential deliverance, at that time, from so tremendous an evil had no other effect than to harden our hearts to such a degree as to have made us provoke the Lord to this fresh display of his vengeance?—What can be pleaded in arrest of Judgement, where Guilt calls aloud for Execution?—But—our God is that most gracious Being, whose property is—always to have
mercy.

mercy.—Notwithstanding our manifold and heinous transgressions, who knoweth, whether, if, in this our day of trouble and rebuke, we implore his forgiveness, with true penitent hearts, and a lively Faith in the merits of his Son Jesus Christ, he may not yet incline his ear unto us, and hearken to our voice?

Let us eagerly embrace the opportunity, of which we know not how soon we may be deprived, of offering up our prayers to him, that his anger may be turned away from us.—Let us pursue the only means in our power of redeeming the mis-spent time, by employing the remainder, with redoubled care and diligence, in a conscientious discharge of our duty to God, our neighbour, and ourselves.

As to those who are already on their near approach towards the verge of life, without having yet learned “so to number their days as to apply their hearts unto wisdom”—may it please God to open their eyes, that they may discover “the things that belong to their” eternal “peace,” “before they go hence, and be no more seen.” May they be so wrought upon by the Divine Grace, as to begin, even at such a protracted season, to work out their salvation with fear and trembling.—They will indeed have, what ought to have been the grand concern of the whole progress of their lives, to accomplish,

plish, if possible, (and, with God's assistance, nothing is impossible), within a very short space of them. However, let them press forward, with their utmost might, in the course of reformation, which they have been so backward to enter upon—and, by the earnestness and sincerity of their Repentance, make all the amends they can for the lateness of it.

And—let not such as are at a more remote distance from the precincts of Old Age—let not even the young, think it enough, that they may have formed resolutions of future amendment—at (it should seem) some more convenient season; flattering themselves with the prospect of a long continuance in this world; any distant portion of which may be early enough (as they vainly conceive) for putting their fancied, unsettled, plan in execution.—Why will they delay to set about the great work, for which alone life was given to them?—Would they but seriously reflect, (and who amongst them can tell how soon the fatal truth may be exemplified in himself?) that Man, in his pride—in the full vigour of his health and strength, is cut down, like the flower of the field;—they would soon be convinced, that the present time is the only season to be depended upon; that there is no trusting to that which is to come.—Let them not put off to a day, which may not ever arrive,—or, if it should, might probably pass away neglected, like those that have gone before,—what, the only juncture which is actually
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in their possession—the instant now—so earnestly demands of them.

Whatever the different stages of our respective lives may be—let us consider, that we are, all of us, advancing, every moment of them, nearer and nearer to the point which is to terminate our existence here on earth—with regard to the precise time of arriving at which, it has pleased the Almighty to leave us in a state of awful uncertainty.—And what use ought we to make of such a reflection, but as a MEMENTO “to take heed to ourselves,* lest that day come upon us “unawares?”

Oh! that we were wise!—that we would consider this—and not suffer the feeble, temporary, joys (if indeed they deserve that name) of a short life to rob us of an Eternity of substantial, incomprehensible, Bliss.—What is a CENTURY—what are millions of millions of years, when compared to endless Duration?—Thither let our attention be principally directed.—Whilst we are here “numbering our days,”—and may we “so number” them, as to “apply our hearts unto wisdom”—whilst we are measuring a transitory existence; by dividing its limited extent into stated periods and revolutions—let us look forward to the tremendous moment, when TIME SHALL BE

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* Luke xxi. 34.

NO MORE ; when there shall be no longer a Firmament over our heads, with “ lights to divide the day from the night, and “ to be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years”—but—the gates of Heaven being thrown open, that the righteous may enter in—and the wide portals of Hell closed on the workers of iniquity—the portion of the former shall be—an undiminished blaze of everlasting Light and Glory;—that of the wicked,—one perpetual Night of outer Darknefs,—Darknefs—the more horrible, for being rendered VISIBLE,—by the dismal gleam, which will be reflected from the flames of that tormenting FURNACE, † “ the smoke” whereof shall “ ascend for ever and ever.”

† Rev. xiv. 11.

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